

## **HOLIDAY FOOD SAFETY**

Food poisoning, caused by bacteria or their toxins, can occur when foods like poultry, pork, beef, fish, eggs, milk and other dairy products are handled or prepared improperly. Salmonella, for example, causes gastroenteritis, an inflammation of the stomach and intestine, and may result in vomiting and/or diarrhea. Poultry, including turkey, that has been improperly handled and/or prepared, had been identified as a source of contamination in cases of salmonella poisoning.

The safest way to thaw frozen meat, such as turkey, is in the refrigerator. This method takes more time, but has the advantage of keeping the meat cooler.

The next safest method to thaw turkey is in a bath of cold water. This also prevents excessive growth of bacteria on the surface of the meat. Water should be changed frequently.

The least recommended way to thaw food is at room temperature. If this is necessary, the frozen meat should be covered with a heavy paper bag to help reduce surface temperature as it thaws.

Cross contamination is another important consideration when preparing food safely. It can happen when bacteria are transferred from raw foods to cooked, ready-to eat foods; usually by unclean hands, cutting surfaces and utensils. To avoid cross contamination, always wash hands thoroughly after handling raw foods, especially meat and poultry. Use hot, soapy water on hands, and include a solution of 1 teaspoon chlorine bleach to 1 quart of water for cutting surfaces and utensils.

Stuffing the turkey should be done just before it goes into the oven. A stuffed bird takes longer to cook because the dressing slows the heating and cooling process. It should be removed as soon as the bird is done. As an added safety measure, the poultry and dressing may be cooked separately with the same appetizing results.

Poultry should be roasted at, or above, 300 degrees Fahrenheit. This kills any bacteria that may be on, or in, the bird. For reasons of safety, it is not recommended that poultry be partially cooked one day and finished the next.

Use a meat thermometer to determine when the turkey is done, especially when cooking larger portions of meat or poultry. Turkey is done when the temperature in the thickest part of the breast, thigh or middle of the dressing reaches 176 degrees Fahrenheit. Left-overs should not be kept for more than a few days. A simple food safety rule to follow is: When in doubt, throw it out.

Remember to make cleanliness a watchword in the kitchen, and keep hot foods hot and cold foods cold. If you follow these tips you should have nothing but compliments for your cuisine this holiday season.